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'I was bored so...'

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‘I was bored so ...’: motivational accounts of participation in an online emo group.

Abstract

We examine members' spontaneous accounts for joining and participation in an online emo forum. The internet and social networking sites are central features of contemporary youth cultures; the analysis of interaction on emo forums can thus provide a way of appreciating emo as a 'community in practice' (cf. Stommel & Koole, 2010). We analyse popular discussion threads collected from a key emo website, using membership categorisation and conversation analysis. In these threads, members introduce themselves, and account for joining and posting pictures in response to a prior request to do so. Analysis shows that newbies establish their emo attributes and hence entitlement to participate while dismissing emo-related motivation for joining the forum, claiming instead a desire to relieve boredom. Participants similarly accounted for posting photos of themselves and for producing fan pics as due to boredom. We show how claiming to be bored allows members to engage with the group while negotiating potentially problematic inferences that attend subcultural membership. We conclude that our approach provides a useful methodology for furthering our understanding of an important aspect of contemporary youth subculture.

Keywords: emo, youth subcultures, online interaction, internet, conversation analysis, membership categorisation analysis.

‘I was bored so ...’: motivational accounts of participation in an online emo group.

Introduction

In this paper, we examine members’ participation in an online ‘emo’ forum, in order to provide a naturalistic snapshot of subcultural affiliation-in-action. We examine in detail, a variety of social interactions as they occurred between forum members on an emo website with a view to seeing what they can tell us about how group membership and participation are constructed and negotiated between members.

Emo subculture

The term ‘emo’ has been used since the 1990s to refer to a particular combination of punk and indie rock which featured lyrics focusing on scorned love, loneliness and depression (Greenwald, 2003; LaGorce, 2005; Ryalls, 2013; Simon & Kelley, 2007). Newspapers, magazines and emo-themed websites have also noted that emo music artists and their devoted listeners display distinct fashion styles wearing predominantly dark coloured clothing, heavy eyeliner, tight trousers and dyed hair quaffed to cover one eye (Blue Banana, 2012; Fitzsimmons, 2008; Grillo, 2008; Ryalls, 2013; Simon & Kelley, 2007).

Emo (or ‘emotional’) has also been associated in research and the media with suicidal thoughts, extreme loneliness and self-harming behaviours (Alleyne, 2008; Bailey, 2005; Sands, 2006; Scott & Chur-Hansen, 2008; Shenker, 2009; Sternudd, 2012). For example, Young, Sweeting and West (2006) argued that the higher incidents of suicide, depression and self-harming behaviours associated with a small number of respondents who identified with goth and emo culture indicated that being emo was a predictor of psychological dysfunction. Whitlock, Powers and Eckenrode (2006) and Plante (2007:14) propose that this behaviour

results from group “contagion”. Sternudd (2012), on the other hand, demonstrated that members of a self-injurers’ (SI) internet forum believed their exposure to photographs of SI and discussions about SI served to alleviate self-harming impulses (see also Resnick et al., 1997).

Other studies of emo subculture have focused on analysing and deconstructing the highly public emotional angst and gender-ambiguous style displayed by male emos, asking whether they are thereby challenging traditional or hegemonic masculinity (Peters, 2010; Ryalls, 2013; Tongson, 2006). From her analysis of popular emo song lyrics and excerpts from various popular emo-themed online forums, Ryalls (2013) concluded that emo displays of traditionally “queer maleness” actually serve to reinforce dominant masculine traits by depicting themselves as victims and thus reinforcing the marginalization of women. Peters (2010) and Tongson (2006) similarly critique the gendered aspects of emo in relation to larger cultural contexts of lesbian music and alternative “gay identities” (Peters, 2010:129).

Studies of emo from both a clinical and sociological perspective have, therefore, taken the ‘sensational’ attributes of emo as their starting point. Phillipov (2006) argues that these apparently harmful elements of emo subcultures should be studied in the context of more mundane group attributes, and members’ accounts of what being emo means to them. We concur with this view and the need to adopt a more situated and member-led perspective on emo. To this end, it is useful to examine the literature on youth subcultures in general, because similar issues have been addressed therein. *Youth subcultural theories*

In the 1970s, the study of youth subcultures was largely focused on their symbolic (rather than ‘real’ or successful) resistance through style to dominant (middle class) values and the reassertion, albeit transformed, of working class values (Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige,

1979). Such sociopolitical meanings were determined largely through the theoretical interpretation of the style and music of particular subcultures. This approach was subsequently challenged in several ways. The post-subcultural theory literature challenged implicit assumptions of homogeneity in subcultural meaning and experience by showing the fluid, localised and temporary nature of contemporary groups (e.g. Bennett, 1999, 2000; Miles, 2000; Muggleton, 2000) and drawing on alternative conceptualisations of the subcultural group, such as neo-tribe, lifestyle and scene (see Bennett, 2011). Other researchers argued against the centrality of class by showing that young people construct identities through consumption (e.g. music, clothing, activities) (Blackman, 2005; Willis, 1990; but see Griffin, 2011, for an historical and contemporary review of the ‘troubled’ relationship between youth culture and class and how this is reflected in the literature). The importance of politics was also questioned by observing that (at least) since the eighties young people are driven more by hedonism (e.g. Redhead, 1990), and the idealised notions of resistance embodied in Subcultural Theory may be a characterisation of researchers’ aspirations rather than subcultural members’ own concerns (cf. Cohen, 1987). The accuracy of these observations has, in turn, received critical appraisal (see Bennett, 2011, for an overview).

Hodkinson (2012) argues that researchers nevertheless remain concerned with the ‘spectacular specifics’ of groups, such as style, and that the more mundane and ordinary aspects of identities, motivations and everyday practices merit closer examination. Furthermore, theorists assume either that the theoretical meanings resonate with members’ lives, or that members are unaware of the real significance of their activities. The challenge, for research on subcultures in general just as for research on emo specifically, is to develop a grounded or empirical approach that can take account of the complex processes in subcultural

lives (op cit). Several studies in the literature provide some indication of how this may be achieved.

Drawing on conversation and discourse analysis, Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) examined the ways members (Goths, hippies, rockers, punks) constructed, negotiated and resisted identities and group membership in interactions with the interviewer. They found that participants resisted potentially relevant subcultural labels (e.g. style, music taste) and accounted for change and affiliation in individualistic terms (e.g. as relating to how they had always felt or what they had always liked). More recently, Greener and Hollands (2006) conducted a large scale, online questionnaire study comparing the explanatory utility of subcultural versus postsubcultural theories in relation to psytrancers¹. In this study members displayed commitment to the subculture by describing themselves as belonging for an extended period, feeling a sense of belonging, and using terms such as ‘family’, ‘community’ and ‘friends’ to refer to other psytrancers. The online psytrance community thus provides an example of a youth culture that is cohesive and homogeneous in spite of operating within a globalised, geographically and socio-economically diverse virtual setting (op cit). Driver (2011) conducted interviews with hardcore music scene members and found that they distinguished authentic from inauthentic types of subcultural membership. Authentic membership was described as a learned skill where behaviours (such as dancing) become subconscious or “embodied” skills. Extrapolating from these studies, the detailed analysis of members’ accounts given in semi-structured interviews has the potential to provide an empirical approach to members’ lives and the meaning of emo from their perspective.

² Psytrancers are young adults who enjoy ‘psychedelic trance’ which is a form of computer-generated dance music, who visit psytrance websites, and attend psytrance events (Greener & Hollands, 2006).

However, such studies do not recognise the limitations and problems that attend data acquired through interviews and questionnaires (e.g. Potter & Hepburn, 2005). For example, they cannot be used to examine what members do together; we need alternative methods to learn about the situated practices of ‘being emo’. Moreover, the questions and therefore responses are driven by the researcher’s social science agenda; more naturalistic methods may allow us to gain new insights into the mundane rather than spectacular aspects of the subculture. One of the aims of this study is, therefore, to explore the potential of a more naturalistic approach to in-group interactions that involves collecting data through internet forums.

Subcultures and internet interaction

Several recent studies of youth subcultures have established the centrality of the internet and social networking (e.g. through chat rooms and message boards). They are important, for example, in the formation and maintenance of group affiliation (on- and offline) (Wilson & Atkinson, 2005, on rave) and participation in a subculture (e.g. Wood, 2003, on straightedge). They play a role in the creation of collective identities; in making the subcultural a global phenomenon (Greener & Hollands, 2006 on psytrance); and in promoting a sense of identity as straightedge (Wood, 2003) and creating a sense of community (Wilson & Atkinson, 2005). Emo music forums and online music-file sharing have been observed to play an important role in increasing the popularity of emo music labels and emo bands (DeRogatis, 1999; Greenwald, 2003). The ubiquity of emo themed online forums, amateur videos and commercially marketed “emo” products (Blue Banana, 2012) also point to the probable relevance of the internet to emo subculture. We therefore propose that internet sites may offer a means of realising membership and of maintaining relations with other members, because they provide an important medium for social interactions between members. We also propose

that the analysis of internet interaction can help us learn something about membership as a situated activity.

Our proposal draws on and adopts an approach by Stommel and Koole (2010). They used conversation analysis (CA) and membership categorisation analysis (MCA) to study an online support group as a 'Community in Practice' (CiP) defined through the active participation of members asking and receiving support and advice. CA aims to show how we accomplish actions through talk, specifically through the 'design' of utterances (how we say what we say) and by identifying the implicit but 'organised reasoning procedures which inform the production of naturally occurring talk' (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998). CA assumes that talk is organised as sequences of paired actions, such that a first action (e.g. an invitation) invites a limited range of second parts (acceptance, refusal), and this enables speakers to coordinate their activity.² MCA examines the use of membership categories in interaction, how they are used to mobilise identities and how categories can make relevant situation specific attributes and entitlements.

The present study

In this study we draw on CA, MCA and the notion of Community in Practice to examine membership and active participation in an emo community as it actually happens. Our aims are threefold-fold: first, to identify and examine instances of actively being emo in internet data; second, to examine how the meaning of participation is worked up or accounted for by

² Although it was developed as an approach to naturally occurring talk, CA has been fruitfully applied to online communication (Antaki, Ardèvol, Núñez & Vayreda, 2005; Stommel, 2008; Vayreda & Antaki, 2009). Internet interactions can be analysed as sequentially related because participants treat them that way (Vayreda & Antaki, 2009).

members; and third, to explore whether this approach provides a useful methodology for furthering our understanding of an important aspect of contemporary youth subcultures.

Method

Data collection

To establish the venues that people interested in emo culture might frequent online, a search of popular websites was undertaken using Google PageRank™ technology. This calculates the popularity of a given webpage by counting how many other webpages reference or link to it (Burges, 2005; Google, 2012). A series of searches using the key words: ‘emo’, ‘emo forum’, ‘emo culture’ yielded several top ranking websites which are equally popular in the UK, Australia, Canada, and the United States. All of these websites are open to public viewing and provide users with the opportunity either to view the conversations taking place between members or to become members of the community, by creating a member profile or ‘avatar’ through which to contribute to conversations and online activities. Due to the uniformity of the structures of these websites, we chose to focus on the activities and conversations on one www.emo-corner.com (EC). The Emo Corner website is a multifaceted website which includes a large discussion forum as well as pages dedicated to defining key characteristics of emo subculture. EC describes itself as a “good source of information on everything emo and a place for emos to talk and hangout” (Emo Corner, 2014).

At the time of data collection, “The Hangout” section³ of the ES website contained 6530 separate discussion threads in which members had contributed over 235,000 posts. Within this huge volume of activity there were 14 discussion threads which generated over 100 posts. These 14 posts were collectively responsible for 49% of the overall traffic in “The Hangout” during our one month period of observation. The 14 threads selected covered a wide range of topics, including debates about the war in Iraq, new member greetings, and phobias. Each discussion thread was downloaded from the website and transferred into a word document for ease of analysis. This then comprised the corpus of data for the purposes of this study.

Ethics

The ethical framework for this project conforms to the newly updated special guidelines for Internet Mediated Research (IMR) produced by the British Psychological Society (2013). These guidelines highlight the importance of assessing the unique parameters of online discussion forums to determine the extent to which users may assume that their participation is private and anonymous. We determined that EC forums are an explicitly public venue where members communicate through the use of self-generated anonymous profiles.

“The Hangout” section is prominently advertised on the main page of the “Emo Forums-Meet Emos” page of the EC website. At the time of data collection all the discussion threads used in this analysis were prominently listed within “The Hangout”. Every page of the EC website also includes a live tally of the number of users currently viewing a particular section of the website, clearly delineating between registered participants and unregistered viewers designated as “guests”. In every instance that the researchers accessed the discussion threads

³ The ES website is divided into different sections such as “Emo Fashion”, “Emo Music”, etc. Each section contains links to related discussions or ‘chats’. “The Hangout” section was the most active section and contained the most discussion and the most posts.

there were between 25-75 “guest” users active on the same forums. We argue that this particular element of the EC website brings forum discussions in line with the BPS definition of public space as somewhere that people “expect to be observed by strangers” (BPS, p25). Furthermore, the forum discussion threads are not the only means available to members for communicating with one another, they may also use private messages. Thus, although the discussion forum is public, the EC website enables a private community to exist through personal messaging.

To contribute to a discussion thread or contact an existing EC member, an individual must register and create a profile name and may provide further information such as geographic location, age, and music preference. The only segment of a user profile available to unregistered viewers of EC forum discussions is the user’s profile name and a tally of the number of posts they have made on EC. The profile information may be changed regularly (although name changes are restricted to once per month) and doing so is common. The regular changing of member names creates an environment where EC users are participating in a continual process of anonymisation.

The nature of our analytic process (detailed below) requires the reproduction of exact quotes from member discussions. The British Psychological Society guidelines suggest that it is preferable to seek consent for direct quotations, however, seeking consent would have required the researchers to join the EC website, and in doing so falsely identify themselves as fellow emo members rather than the more appropriate “guest” identity automatically assigned to non-members by EC. Furthermore, the EC administration make explicit the public-private nature of the website both in introductory information pages and through the provision of statistics at the bottom of each page which list the number of members who are active within

the website (also viewable for particular discussion topics) as well as the number of guest (non-member) viewers. Thus we contend that the public nature of the discussions and the elaborate practice of anonymization provide sufficient latitude for the observation of EC forum discussions while safeguarding the identities of the participants.

Analytic process

As is usual with this data-driven approach, we first conducted a preliminary analysis of the corpus of data, in order to make a collection of instances of (here) participation in the EC community. In particular, we examined the threads for sequential and action-oriented patterns of interaction in which posters displayed participation in a forum activity. From this, we identified and extracted sequences in which members responded to a request to do something (introduce self, post pictures), and they accounted for their actions through use of the words “bored” or “boredom”. These sequences occurred in three threads in particular. Having built our collection, we drew on the principles of CA and MCA outlined above to examine these instances in more detail, analyzing how the terms ‘bored’ and ‘boredom’ were deployed and the interactional purposes thereby served.

Analysis

We have organised the analysis that follows around the three request-threads noted above: a request for personal information from newcomers to the website; a request for members to post a photograph of themselves for another member; and a request for fan pictures relating to the website. We examine each in turn.

‘Newbie’ introductions

As the thread title indicates, the purpose of this thread was to provide an avenue for new members of emo-space to post introductory statements about themselves. The initiating post

in the thread suggests that members ‘tell us a bit about yourself, and try to make it interesting or people won’t read it’. Readers are then instructed to ‘Introduce yourself! All categories are optional’. This is followed by several possible categories of self-description, such as ‘About you’ (name, age, where from, style); Favourites (e.g. colours, band, music genre, item of clothing), and General (‘Why did you join ES?’, ‘What kind of things would you like to talk about here?’). Space does not permit the reproduction of the full post, so we have confined our observations to the category ‘Describe your style’, ‘Why did you join ES?’ and ‘What kinds of things would you like to talk about here?’. The extracts that follow draw explicitly on the categories of description provided, as they reproduce the original posting and simply insert answers.

Extract 1: ‘Newbie Introductions’ thread

1 Pandora Black : Describe your style: ANYTHING BLACK! Skinny jeans, bandanna’s,
on my wrists my neck or my head it’s a bandanna it can
3 go anywhere LOL I love DC and Element skate brands...um...ALL
4 HAIL THE CHUCK TAYLORS! Gotta love Converse, rings of all
5 types on all my fingers black nail polish, black/rainbow tank tops in
6 the summer in winter I break out the band t-shirts-AC/DC, Pink Floyd,
7 Bullet for My Valentine Bob Marley.

((lines omitted))

8 General: Why did you join ES? Bordon
9 What kinds of things would you like to talk about here? IDK I just
10 hope to get a few good friends out of this just talking about everyday
11 stuff.[IDK is an abbreviation of ‘I don’t know’]

Extract 2: ‘Newbie Introductions’ thread

1 WeRAnonymousWeRLegion : Describe Your Style: uh...not emo, although my
haircut is apparently
2 emo (it isn’t...It’s just that I look dumb with my part in the center of

3 my head -_-) I'm morbid, presumably mentally disturbed...hey I'm
4 your residential psycho check it out .

((lines omitted))

5 Why did you join ES? Out of boredom

6 What kind of things would you like to talk about here? anything

7 but "I'm going to kill myself"

Extract 3: 'Newbie Introductions' thread

[posted twice, with additional comments starred as below]

1 Cole Preston: Describe Your Style: ★★Skate/Emo★★ (sometimes I fool around and
wear hip hop)

((lines omitted))

3 Why did you join ES?: already answered.*

4 What kind of things would you like to talk about here?: everything

**(prior answer)* Why did you join ES? To meet ppl. [people]

These posts provide, as requested, an account for joining the forum. In extracts 1 and 2, the posters produce minimal responses: 'boredom' (1:8), and 'out of boredom' (2:5). They thus imply that joining is motivated by wanting relief from a negative psychological state (boredom) rather than anything in particular about *this* forum, such as some intrinsic interest in it or a feature of it. This implication is reinforced by providing an account of their expectations or what they would like to get out of their participation in ES. For example, 'I just hope to get a few good friends out of this talking about everyday stuff' (1:9-10), 'To meet ppl' (3:3*) and 'anything' (2:6). It is noteworthy that these posters refer to the purpose of joining the forum and their expectations in a way that makes no reference to features of emo. Instead, posters cite very mundane 'anybody's' reasons, such as making friends, meeting people and conversations about 'everyday stuff' (1:10). These make available the inference that posters' motivation for joining the forum (to relieve boredom) is centred around relief through these mundane activities rather than through emo-related activities or interests.

Indeed, WeRAnonymousWeRLegion specifically rejects the stereotypical emo concern with suicide: he writes that he would like to talk about '[A]nything but "I'm going to kill myself" (2:6-7). Thus, these posters' descriptions imply that their participation in emo corner is not driven by their desire for affiliation with the category or other category members.

Their prior self-descriptions do, however, refer to attributes that make relevant emo category membership or affiliation such as clothing, preference for particular brand names, and emotions. Watson and Weinberg (1982) note that categories are conventionally associated with a set of 'category bound' activities, attributes, and entitlements and obligations that can be made live by invoking that particular category or its incumbents. Conversely, category memberships may be made relevant through descriptions of those category relevant predicates, without explicitly invoking the category label (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). In extract 1, the poster describes her style as 'ANYTHING BLACK! Skinny jeans' and she mentions brand names (including Chuck Taylors). The colour, brand and style (skinny jeans) are inferably emo.⁴ In extract 2, the poster describes style as 'not emo, although my haircut is apparently emo'. She also describes her mental state as 'morbid', again something that is category-bound to emo. The poster in extract 3 describes his style as 'Skate/Emo' explicitly, the music genres he likes as including but not restricted to emo, and his personality as 'sensitive'. Each poster therefore describes self in terms of some attributes that are hearably emo, and thereby invoke their identification with emo. It is worth noting that in extract 3 the poster edits his original post to include emo attributes, such as describing his style as 'Skate/Emo' (3:1). In these ways, posters imply membership of or affiliation with emo but they also portray themselves as not motivated to join the forum *because* of this identity.

⁴ Skinny jeans and this brand name as well as hairstyle are mentioned on the emo website, under 'emo fashion'.

A similar pattern can be observed in extracts 4 to 6 from the same thread. Here, posters do not explicitly employ the response categories but they do provide self-descriptions and an account for joining ES.

Extract 4: 'Newbie Introductions' thread

1 Becca: Hey. I am Becca. I'm sixteen, currently living in England. Became
2 dead bored, so I
3 joined up to yet another networking/forum site, which just
4 happened to be emo-space
5 this time. I love music and yadayada. Definately been through a lot
6 and stereotyped as emo
7 and such, and sure I love the style, but I'm really just here to
8 hang around and meet some new people, have some interesting
9 conversation.
10 It doesn't even look like anyone replies to this thread but ohwell,
11 got to start somewhere.

Extract 5: 'Newbie Introductions' thread

1 Xsilent_heartacheXx: hey im McKinzee im 13 and live in Texas um im learning how to
2 play electric guitar n i like
3 writing poems and songs im super depressed right now
4 with everything going on in my life
5 um im 5ft 4in i have dark brown hair and dark blue eyes im really
6 shy unless u get to know
7 me my bf has black hair and is a lil bit taller than me i cant really
8 describe him i joined because i was super bored i guess thats it

In these posts, new members address the question of why they joined the forum thereby selecting this proposed category of self-description from the several proffered. These accounts resonate with those given by posters in extracts 1 to 3. That is, in extract 4, Becca states that

she ‘became dead bored, so I joined up’ (4:2). In extract 5, Xsilent_heartacheXx also attributes joining to her state of boredom: ‘i joined because i was *super* bored’ (5:8; emphasis added). She thus emphasises this state by characterising it as an extreme form of boredom. Similar to the extracts above, posters’ accounts implicitly reject features of the website or emo as motivating their participation in the forum.

In addition to these accounts, the posters also produce several self-descriptions. These include name (and nickname), age and location, and (in extract 5) height, hair and eye colour and being shy. Apart from possibly age (emos tend to be teenagers), these descriptions are ordinary kinds of descriptions that anyone might use to describe themselves; they are not specifically emo.

They do, however, describe further self-related aspects that invoke affiliation with emo. Love of music, being stereotyped as emo, and having ‘been through a lot’ make relevant the category membership of the poster in extract 4. Similarly, ‘writing poems and songs’, being ‘super depressed’ and the reference to ‘everything going on in my life’ in extract 5, display an emotional person and (given the reference to being depressed) we can infer that the things going on are difficult rather than exciting or pleasing. In these ways, the posters mobilise their identity as emo, as one among other identities related to age, residence and so on. We suggest that this addresses a potentially difficult identity issue, establishing both one’s uniqueness *and* emo category membership.

At the same time, these posters dismiss being emo or an interest in emo as the basis for wanting to join the forum. So, in extract 4, lines 7-8, Becca concludes her self-description with ‘I love the style, but I’m really jus here to ...’. In this way, she addresses the assumption

that joining is motivated by a preference for the style, but implicitly contrasts this with what is the case ('really just here to', 4:7), that is, to meet people. Playing down the significance of emo attributes as motivating factors is reinforced by characterising EC as 'yet another networking/forum site', that she 'just happened' to join, thereby implying that selecting this forum was due to coincidence rather than choice. Her reference to 'yet another [forum]' and 'this time' suggests that it is one in a series of memberships, thereby indicating there is nothing distinctive about joining this site. The description of her choice of internet site therefore reinforces the work done by the use of 'bored' to characterise her motivation for joining EC. Similarly, in extract 5, the poster's claim to have joined because of boredom is followed by 'I guess that's it', thereby indicating that this is the sole and sufficient reason for joining. Finally, the poster in extract 4 describes what she would like to get out of her participation in EC. She says, 'I'm really just here to hang around and meet some new people, have some interesting conversation' (4:8-9). As above, then, these are mundane 'anybody's' reasons for participation.

Therefore, in all these extracts, posters reject emo-related motivation for joining the forum, but only after having already established emo-attributes or credentials, and hence their entitlement to participate. In other words, they claim (indirectly) the legitimacy of belonging while discounting emo as their reason for joining.

Some evidence for the significance of first establishing legitimate participation through category membership can be seen in the following extract.

Extract 6: 'Newbie Introductions' thread

1 Emilee_♥Vampi: Describe your style: Just look at my picture?

[photo posted in a members only space]

((few lines omitted))

2 Music Genre: It varies
3 Food: Oh dang, No idea
4 Item of clothing: uhm, no idea
5 Pastime: Reading, Hanging out with friends
6 Physical Feature Of Yourself: You tell me?
7 Thing About Your Personality: I can be pretty crazy and hyper
8 General
9 Why did you join ES?: I need people to hang out with while I'm stuck
10 in California for the next few months
11 What kind of things would you like to talk about here?: Anything fun
((few lines omitted))
12 Kane: Fake?
13 Raindrops: I was thinking that. But if not, she seems a little full of herself.

The poster here avoids describing her style ('just look at my picture?'), her taste in music ('it varies') and specifying any interests that might relate to emo. Moreover, she describes herself as 'pretty crazy and hyper', which is contrary to the negative emotions usually associated with emo. In other words, she doesn't first establish her category affiliation and therefore the legitimacy of her participation in the forum. Thus, while her account for joining (wanting 'people to hang with') and what she wants to gain from participation ('Anything fun') resonate with the accounts given in the extracts above, this similarity is insufficient to establish entitlement to belong. Instead, one member questions her authenticity ('fake?', 6:12) and a second aligns with that assessment ('I was thinking that', 6:13) and provides an alternative, modified but no less negative assessment of the poster ('if not, she seems a little full of herself', 6:13). The implication is that where emo attributes are omitted, censure may follow.

Our analysis of the ‘newbie introductions’ thread shows how these new members negotiate identity issues and account for wanting to join the forum directly. In the sections below, we examine accounts of participation in other activities on the website.

‘Kane Wants You!’ thread

The first two extracts we examine are responses to a very different request. This is reproduced in extract 7 below.

Extract 7: ‘Kane Wants You!’ thread

- 1 Kane: Look here bitches, ya know that sign thing Andrew did?
- 2 Well I want it to.
- 3 and I want it bigger, better and fuck loads more sexy. Join Kane's Bitches
[posts a private picture with link for members to view]

Here, Kane asks other members to post photographs of themselves which incorporate the caption ‘Kane’s bitch’. The reference to ‘bitches’ implies that his request is directed towards female members. He constructs his request by referring to a previous thread (‘ya know that sign thing Andrew did?’), and by then drawing a comparison between that and what he wants (‘I want it to[o], and I want it bigger, better and [...] more sexy’. This could invite a variety of second pair parts or actions including agreement or refusal of the demand. Extracts 8 and 9 are positive responses to this request. Each extract includes the subsequent reaction posts.*Extract 8: ‘Kane Wants You!’ thread*

- 1 Aneraxium♥Niks♥: Here. Before you question why, I wanted to, I was bored with
- 2 nothing better to
- 3 do. (excuse my hideous face, couldn't be arsed to redo makeup. and the
- 4 red splotch behind the 'D' I screwed up a line.)
- 5 I couldn't choose from three of my awfuls.
[includes 3 pictures of herself in different poses with Kane’s Bitch written on her chest]
- 6 Rellik San: You look like the chick from the ring... but with big boobs.
- 7 Can only be a good thing.
- 8 ashy=): damn <3 [*<3 is a heart symbol which infers liking something*]
- 9 Aneraxium♥Niks♥: ferk off Sellik. <3

Extract 9: 'Kane Wants You!' thread

- 1 !!Paradox!!: I am sorry if it is blurryy andd dark.I just came out of bed and I was
2 bored.
 [includes photo of herself with Kane written on her chest]
3 1237: HOTNESS
4 !!Paradox!!: [smiley face graphic]
5 Cool. a good comment.

Both respondents provide photographs of themselves which include the specified 'sign thing' comprising the words 'Kane's bitch' written across their chests. Of particular interest here is that prior to presenting their photographs, posters produce an explanation for doing so, and one poster makes explicit the presumed need to provide such an account: she says 'before you question why' (8:1). These posters produce similar reasons for creating and presenting their photos: 'I wanted to I was bored with nothing better to do' and 'I just came out of bed and I was bored'. These accounts make relevant posters' motivation for posting (to relieve boredom) and a context for their state of boredom: 'just getting up' or having 'nothing better to do'. Doing something because one is bored (with nothing better to do) suggests a lack of investment in the boredom-relieving activity: it implies that it is not of intrinsic value, but simply a means to an end. Subsequent posts make no reference to the motivation for posting: thus relieving boredom is treated as a sufficient explanation.

A further observation is that the posters produce a critical assessment of their photos. In extract 8, for example, Aneraxium♥Niks♥ states 'excuse my hideous face [...] and the red splotch behind the D'. She also refers to the three photos presented as 'awfuls' from which she can't select one, the implication being that they are equally bad. In extract 9, !!Paradox!! apologises for the quality of the photo ('I am sorry if it is blurry andd dark'). It is interesting that, having responded to a request to produce a photo, posters point to its deficiencies. In

extract 8, moreover, the poster accounts for her 'hideous face' in a way that attributes responsibility for her facial appearance to herself: 'couldn't be arsed to redo make up' (8:3). It is worth noting however that subsequent posts include a positive assessment of appearance that is, in turn, acknowledged and not rejected by the original poster (8:7-8,10; 9:3-5). Why make the effort to produce and upload the photos, and then play down the quality and the motivation for doing so in this way? CA treats what is said as a solution to a problem, so the analytic question is then one of identifying the problem (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995).

One possibility is that they are avoiding being seen as someone who is simply obeying Kane's demands: 'I want [that sign thing]' (7:3). A second possibility relates to features of Kane's post. In particular, he refers to female recipients as 'bitches'; he demands 'sexy' pictures; and invites a (virtual) possessive relationship ('join *Kane's* bitches'). There may be a sense, then, in which posters are responding to this characterization of them in terms of their appearance and their willingness to be one of 'Kane's bitches'. Playing down the quality of the picture and portraying the lack of effort put in to making it, allows speakers to participate in a popular discussion (amounting to over 1000 lines of dialogue) while implicitly rejecting the possible inference that they are motivated by a desire to 'be sexy'. The use of an alternative motivation (relieving boredom) also allows participants to resist the potential but problematic motivation of wanting to be one of 'Kane's bitches'.

A further point relates to the sequential features of the extracts presented. In normal conversation, in which the first turn is a request or an invitation, and the second is compliance with that request, we would expect the third turn to include the first speaker's acknowledgement or assessment of the second speaker's response to their prior request. This

pattern can, for example, be observed in the following extract, where Kane produces a positive assessment of the (second turn) prior posting in the third turn position.

Extract 10: 'Kane Wants You!' thread

- 1 XxKennedyxX: Sorry that it's sideways [smiley face]
[posts picture of 'Kane's Bitch' written on a large piece of paper]
- 2 Kane: ^good bitch

However, in extracts 8 and 9, we notice that the third turn is taken by another member of the forum. For example, in extract 8, Rellik San produces the third turn assessment (an explicit reference to Aneraxium♥Niks♥' appearance), and in extract 9, 1237 assesses the prior posting with 'HOTNESS' (9:3). Stommel and Koole also observe that the third turn is treated as open to anyone and describe it as a special feature of internet conversation. We propose that this open third turn helps facilitate group interaction in the internet forum.

ES Fan pics thread

The following extracts are also responses, this time to a request from a website administrator for 'fan pics' (photos or pictures supporting the website).

Extract 11: 'ES Fan Pics' thread

- 1 Assassin-Wolf: I was bored xD [xD means 'smile']
[photo posted to private member viewing area]
- 2 mysty_rious: cool!!
- 3 ?KyootEmo?: Awesome fan pic! Hee hee really cute! XD

Extract 12: 'ES Fan Pics' thread

- 1 BrianBoo.: got really bored.

2 but yeah heres mine
 [picture posted underneath]

Extract 13: 'ES Fan Pics' thread

 B3N: [posts graphic drawing with the words 'emo corner' written across it]
1 Yeah...bored [smiley face graphic]
2 Pinkbaby_kisses: omg
3 I'm so confused
4 ~Unfit_ME~: Cool Beans!

In these extracts, respondents provide the requested fan pic. As above, the production of the picture is accompanied by an account for posting it. This explanation is minimal, 'I was bored' (11:1), 'got really bored' (12:1), and 'Yeah ... bored' (13:2). The subsequent responses, as before, do not concern the motivation for offering a picture; specifically, they do not challenge posters' claims about boredom. Instead, subsequent posts are assessments of the photo rather than the account of its production ('cool!!!', 11:2, and 'awesome fan pic! Hee Hee really cute XD', 11:3). In these extracts, just as those we examined above, the claim to be driven to create a fan pic through boredom plays down the creator's investment in it.

To summarise, in all these extracts, posters respond to a prior request or invitation by producing a photo or picture. They also provide an account for their actions (i.e. responding to the request). These accounts play down the significance of that action by making relevant a particular motivation for posting a picture: 'I was bored'. In characterising motivation thus, they minimise their commitment to the associated action.

Conclusion

In the analysis, we showed how participants dismissed emo-related motivation for joining the forum, claiming instead a desire to relieve boredom. We showed, too, how participants

similarly accounted for posting fan pics and photographs as due to boredom. On the basis of these analytic observations, there are four main points we want to make in conclusion, relating to how participants account for motivation, the importance of establishing category affiliation, internet interaction and ‘norms of engagement’, and methodology.

First, in the analysis we saw members engaging with each other through a variety of activities: posting fan pics, posting photos of themselves at someone’s request, and accounting for joining the forum. They also provided unprompted accounts of their motivation for participating in these activities, to relieve boredom. We showed that these claims functioned to display posters’ lack of commitment to the activities themselves, thereby also implicitly rejecting the inference that their actions were driven by emo-related concerns (such as posting fan pics because the poster likes emo or joining the forum because of a desire to ‘be emo’). The latter was reinforced by describing an everyday (not emo-related) purpose for joining or accounting for what they wanted out of the forum. Furthermore, we observed that attributing activity to boredom was never challenged or criticised by other members in these extracts; it was thus treated as an acceptable justification for behaviour. We propose that by claiming boredom as their motivation, these members were able to project an image of independence or autonomy within EC whilst participating in activities that may otherwise be perceived to show commitment to the group.

Our observations regarding the apparent resistance to displaying commitment to the group, and participants’ avoidance of emo-based reasons for affiliation are similar to those made in other studies. For example, Greener and Hollands (2006: 402) note that some respondents were opposed to being labelled as a ‘psytrancer’ and that not all respondents were ‘comfortable with being seen as a member of a subculture’. McCulloch et al. (2006) observe

that Chavs or Neds rejected the group label and the idea that they were part of a homogeneous group, claiming instead that local groups based around area of residence were more relevant; the Goths in their study produced individualistic motivations for their affiliation with features of the Goth subculture.

Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) and Driver (2011) suggest that being seen to be doing something (dressing a particular way, liking particular music etc.) *because* one is a member of a subculture may be regarded as a shallow or inauthentic basis for engaging in that activity. That is, it may be taken by others to imply conformity or copying others and it is therefore not surprising that members orient to the problems of category affiliation in accounting for participation in the subcultural forum. Widdicombe (1998) identified various ways in which the young people she and Wooffitt studied denied membership of the potentially appropriate subcultural category. For example, they produced individualistic motives for group affiliation and the adoption of style ('I've always been interested in the supernatural'; 'this is the way I feel') and they denied possession of criterial features ('I haven't got that [punk] attitude'). We argue that posters here are addressing similar concerns by constructing an alternative motivation for participation in the online community, that is, to relieve boredom. We thus show that concerns about the basis of group participation are 'live' even when interacting with each other (as opposed to an interviewer) and that claiming to be bored functions as a further means of resisting assumptions about group affiliation as the basis for what they do.

It is in this context that our second point is particularly relevant. We found that posters' accounts of having joined to relieve boredom occurred only after establishing or making relevant their 'credentials' or legitimate participation in the forum. For example, newbies' descriptions included attributes that made relevant their membership of emo. (Although they

did not describe themselves solely in these terms, or even rejected the label ‘emo’). Stommel and Koole (2010) also note that establishing one’s legitimacy as a member plays an important role in participating in online support groups: for example, accomplishing legitimate membership in turn dictates whether newbies receive responses to their initial posts in online social groups. The posts we have examined therefore show how members skillfully navigate two interactional concerns: the need to establish their identity as emo in order to participate as legitimate members of the forum, while rejecting emo membership as motivating their participation in it. Our approach is thus able to address some sensitive issues in subcultural lives (cf. Hodkinson, 2012).

Our third point relates to the central role of online interaction in facilitating the formation and maintenance of group affiliation and in promoting emo as a community (cf. Wilson & Atkinson, 2005). Our analysis pointed to features of interaction through which the ‘community’ aspect may be built up (such as the open third turn and open requests). Similarly, ‘norms of engagement’ were observed in extract 13 by looking in detail at an interaction in which the participants ‘noticed’ and addressed deviation from expected practices (here the poster not establishing her credentials as emo). Thus, we can begin to appreciate group participation ‘in action’. Stommel and Koole (2010:375) also conclude that ‘membership is granted on the condition that newcomers align to the norms and practices that are constitutive of that community’.

Fourth, we propose that MCA/CA is a useful methodology for studying membership of emo subculture as a situated practice. Through examining the interactions of adolescents on an emo-themed website, this project offers a way of analysing naturalistic insider accounts of participation in one aspect of emo subculture, online interaction. This approach also draws

from and contributes to research on youth subcultures by offering an example of how group activities can be constructed and negotiated between members of the same group, through the details of ongoing interaction. Moreover, examining members' accounting strategies can provide interesting insights into the way that affiliation with emo is negotiated as well as providing a naturalistic snapshot of the way that some members work up their own investment in emo culture.

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